

## HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP WITH SYSTEMS CHANGE

Families of consumers who are mentally ill and substance abusers often can be highly effective as advocates for systems change. They bring life skills, credibility, energy...and determination based on their commitment to helping their relatives.

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**Families can be advocates, helping service systems acquire the financial and political resources needed to improve the system.**

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Family involvement begins with education - both for families to learn about what systems changes are needed, and for providers and policy-makers to learn about the unique perspectives families have to offer.

Family involvement also means giving families active roles in **implementing** services or systems changes.

## CHALLENGES TO INVOLVING FAMILIES

Perhaps the biggest challenge to involving families in systems change is **stigma**. Families are often ashamed about having a family member with mental illness and substance abuse problems, and are reluctant to become involved in activities that might mean more visibility in the community.

**Tokenism**, whether “real” or “imagined,” can also be a problem. Professionals and community leaders sometimes want to involve families for “public relations” value, but are hesitant to include them in debating issues and in real decision-making.

Families also may believe erroneously that they are only tokens, and will decline to take a more active role, even when their input is seriously solicited.

Families also may feel it is unrealistic to believe that their efforts will actually bring about systems change, while others simply do not know what to do. Families need **education about systems change**- how to bring it about and what to expect as a result of their efforts.

## STRATEGIES FOR INVOLVING FAMILIES

Family members can serve highly effective **advocacy** functions in bringing about systems change, often bringing direct **energy** and **skill** to the process based on their commitment to helping their ill relatives. Ways to involve them in the systems change process include:

- Identifying families to get involved through contact with Alliance for the Mentally Ill affiliates, mental health associations and other mental health, substance abuse and forensic mental health organizations.
- Identifying leaders not only locally, but through contact with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, the National Mental Health Association and other groups that can nominate families in your community who are also leaders on the national scene.
- Trying to identify one or two family leaders who can be “appointed as a committee” to recruit other families on your behalf.
- Dealing honestly with the issues of stigma and tokenism, making sure that family members have “full member” status on task forces, committees, etc.

- Providing education for families on the principles of systems change - how people, organizations and communities can work together to promote enduring change.
- Sharing with families what systems changes you think are needed...but being willing to modify your ideas based on their input.

## EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

- Members of the *San Diego Alliance for the Mentally Ill* successfully brought together representatives from the Police Department and County Mental Health Services to form a Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT), that provides emergency services for people with mental illness and works to prevent inappropriate incarceration.
- In *Montgomery County, Pennsylvania*, family members and consumers serve on a *Forensic Task Force* with representatives from criminal justice, mental health, substance abuse and the courts. They all share authority to implement changes in all systems affecting people with severe mental illness. The Montgomery County Emergency Service (MCES) has been identified as a model program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA), and by *American Jails* magazine.
- Family members who serve on forensic advocacy committees at the national and state levels work together to provide technical assistance to families, professionals and policy-makers about legislative issues on state and national levels across the country.

## RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

### **American Correctional Association**

8025 Laurel Lake Court  
Laurel, MD 20707  
301/206-5100

### **Center for Mental Health Services Knowledge Exchange Network**

P.O. Box 42490  
Washington, DC 20015  
800/789-2647

### **Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health**

1021 Prince Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314-2971  
703/684-7710

### **Human Interaction Research Institute**

18111 Nordhoff Street  
Northridge, CA 91330-8245  
818/677-2550

### **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill**

200 North Glebe Road, Suite 1015  
Arlington, VA 22203-3754  
703/524-7600; e-mail: nami@aol.com

### **National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association**

730 North Franklin Street, Suite 501  
Chicago, IL 60610  
312/642-0049

### **National Institute of Corrections Community Corrections Division**

500 1st Street, 7th Floor  
Washington, DC 20534  
800/995-6423

### **National Institute of Corrections Jail Division**

1960 Industrial Circle, Suite A  
Longmont, CO 80501  
800/995-6429

### **PRIDE**

50 Hurt Plaza, Suite 210  
Atlanta, GA 30303  
404/577-4500

### **PROTOTYPES Systems Change Center**

5601 West Slauson Avenue, #200  
Culver City, CA 90230  
310/641-7795

## ABOUT THE GAINS CENTER

The National GAINS Center for People with Co-Occurring Disorders in the Justice System was established in 1995. The Center gathers information about mental health and substance abuse services provided in the justice system, tailors materials to the specific needs of localities, and provides technical assistance to help them plan, implement and operate appropriate, cost-effective programs.

The GAINS Center is a Federal partnership between two centers of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration -- the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment and the Center for Mental Health Services -- and the National Institute of Corrections.

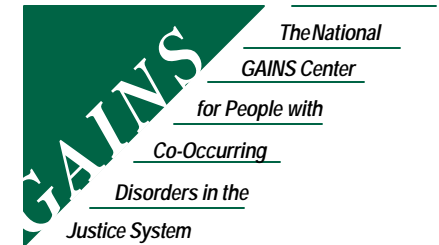
The GAINS Center is operated by Policy Research, Inc. in collaboration with the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute. For more information, contact:



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*Produced by **Human Interaction Research Institute**  
in collaboration with **The GAINS Center.***



# INVOLVING FAMILIES IN SYSTEMS CHANGE:

**IMPROVING SERVICES  
FOR PEOPLE WITH  
CO-OCCURRING DISORDERS  
IN THE CRIMINAL AND  
JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEMS**

***Strategies for  
Service Providers***

